

Can You Say How You Feel?: The Impact of Emotion Word Vocabulary On Emotional
Intelligence

Alyssa Bobich

Professor Julian K. Saint Clair

Loyola Marymount University

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Abstract

We comprehend the world through the words we have to describe it, though oftentimes our limited vocabulary fails to provide the depth or breadth of description necessary to encompass our experiences. This same phenomenon occurs with describing our emotions. Past research has shown that individuals who can describe their emotion experiences with more detail have lower levels of aggression and depression as well as a greater ability to regulate their emotions, aspects of high emotional intelligence (Kashdan, Barrett, & Mcknight, 2015; Barrett, Gross, Christensen, & Benvenuto, 2001; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003). This study intends to determine whether increasing an individual's emotion word vocabulary by introducing new emotion concepts will result in an increase in emotional intelligence. By instructing English-speaking participants to learn and apply non-English emotion words and by tracking their emotional intelligence with the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), this study will empirically show the impact of increasing the ability to convey emotion experience on emotional intelligence.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, vocabulary, emotion concepts

Introduction

Language is the framework for our understanding of the world, a lens through which all we see and comprehend flows. Though a common language allows us to connect with each other and collaborate to increase our understanding of the world, it can also limit our understandings by creating rigid concepts to which our thoughts conform (Wu & Dunning, 2018). Interestingly, these concepts are not universal across languages; different cultures develop different words to describe their unique joint experiences (Wu & Dunning, 2018), so while vocabulary limits emotional expression of all people, the specific limitations differ between languages.

The ability to distinguish emotional experiences often results in a higher degree of emotional intelligence (the ability to understand, regulate, and utilize emotions) (Kashdan et al., 2015; Barrett et al., 2001; Mayer et al., 2003, p. 27). Emotional intelligence has been a topic of interest in recent years due to its application in workplace training and psychological treatments, and it has been demonstrated that training can improve emotional intelligence (Mattingly & Kraiger, 2019; Kashdan et al., 2015). Given this information, does a larger emotion vocabulary lead to greater emotional intelligence?

Background Research

Past research has debated whether emotions should be defined and categorized based on physiological and neurological phenomena or based on subjective experience (Gentsch et al., 2018; Barrett, 2006; Adolphs, 2016; Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1999; Hoemann & Barrett, 2019). Adolphs (2016) suggests differentiating between emotion states, emotion concepts, and emotional experiences, treating them as separate phenomena until we empirically prove their connections. This approach separates the physiological phenomena from linguistics from subjective experience, offering an opportunity to examine which factors are being used to study emotion. I will be following Adolphs's suggestion and utilizing the distinct factors of emotional states, emotional concepts, and emotional experiences in describing my research.

In order to better capture the nuances of our complex understanding of emotion, researchers have attempted to create scales by which to capture the meaning of emotion words (the words used to describe emotional experiences). Smith and Ellsworth (1985) created a comprehensive model to thoroughly "differentiate emotional experience" (p. 813). By gathering data from subject interviews and rating-based questionnaires, they mapped fifteen emotions -- "happiness, sadness, fear, anger, boredom, challenge, interest, hope, frustration, contempt, disgust, surprise, pride, shame, and guilt" -- on the basis of six dimensions: "pleasantness, anticipated effort, certainty, attentional activity, self-other responsibility/control, and situational control" (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985, p. 820, 813). Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson (1999) suggest that describing emotion solely by its physical manifestations creates an incomplete picture, offering alternative solutions such as non-bipolar scales. These models give us a better understanding of which aspects of emotional experiences we have the vocabulary to describe and provide a potential structure for comparing the emotion vocabulary of different languages.

The breadth and depth of emotion word vocabulary varies from language to language, as does the facets of emotional experience that have the most nuanced descriptors. For example, “the Pintupi of aboriginal Australians (Morice, 1978) cannot elucidate feelings of guilt,” and English speakers “may understand grief, but have little understanding for *mo’emo’e*, or feelings of loneliness tinged with a “sense of the uncanny” commonly felt among Tahitians (Levy, 1973)” (Wu & Dunning, 2018, p. 27). Even if we grasp the concepts behind words, and even if we fully understand the dimensions of the emotion words we currently employ, our limited vocabulary limits the range of emotions we can identify.

This shows how powerful the ability to express an emotional concept can be. In fact, individuals with a greater ability to differentiate emotional experiences are more likely to regulate their emotions and avoid negative coping mechanisms such as self-harm and drinking (Kashdan et al., 2015; Barrett et al., 2001). All of these are examples of high emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence encompasses “(a) perceiving emotion accurately, (b) using emotion to facilitate thought, (c) understanding emotion, and (d) managing emotion” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997 qtd. in Mayer et al., 2003, p. 27). It is important to note these different branches of emotional intelligence; a high degree of emotional intelligence does require the knowledge and understanding of different emotions, but encompasses the application of these abstract concepts to regulating behavior and thoughts.

In short, the ability to express the nuances of emotion experiences in detail can have a positive impact on emotional intelligence, which in turn can improve health, well-being, and even career preparedness (Mattingly & Kraiger, 2019). I will study whether the introduction of more emotion concepts will lead to greater emotional intelligence. I hypothesize that simply expanding the vocabulary through which we identify emotions will expand the ability to regulate and express our emotions.

Methods

Before the study begins, I will conduct a pretest to determine which English and non-English emotion words and concepts people are unfamiliar with and map those words on a model similar to Smith and Ellsworth (1985) to ensure a spectrum of emotional experiences are covered.

Next, I will gather three groups of participants. I will tell each participant I will be testing their ability to memorize vocabulary words, and will give each participant one of three sets of flashcards. Set 1 will have the definitions of 10 commonly used English emotion words such as happiness, sadness, etc.. Based on the importance of concepts and past memories to word comprehension (Gentsch et. al., 2018; Basnight-Brown & Altarriba, 2016), I will also include examples of word use and require participants to write a personal experience relating to each word. Set 2 will have definitions of 10 foreign or very uncommon English emotion words that describe emotion concepts unfamiliar to the average American. I will pull non-English and uncommon words from online databases such as the ones created by Lomas (2016) and Jones

(2019). As with Set 1, Set 2 will include examples of word use and require participants to recall a personal experience. Set 3 will be a control and consist of common non-emotion English words like “table” or “light.” This set, too, will include examples and require participants to come up with examples of personal experiences.

I will then instruct the participants to spend two weeks studying the words. As part of the studying process, I will instruct them to email a daily journal, similar to the journal in Barrett (2001), and answer a few open-ended questions each day, as listed below:

Which words from the list did you see in your life today?

Give a specific example of a part of your day that involved a word from the list.

At the beginning and end of the study, I will have each participant complete the MSCEIT. In addition, to ensure participants are actively adding these emotion words to their vocabulary, I will give each group a vocabulary test at the beginning and end of the experiment. To mitigate potential bias from a suspicion probe or retest bias by participants, I will also give participants other tests, including a questionnaire about personal study methods.

To analyze the data, I will first determine whether the participants actually integrated their given words into their vocabulary by comparing their vocabulary test scores over the same period. I will also analyze the participants’ journal entries to determine if they engaged with the material. Finally, I will compare how the participants’ EI scores changed over the two week period and compare each groups’ change in EI over time.

Expected Results

At the end of the experiment, I will write a paper detailing the experiment and resultant insights into the effect of emotion word vocabulary on emotional intelligence. I predict that Set 1 and Set 2 participants will increase their vocabulary and emotional intelligence, with Set 2 participants having a higher increase in emotional intelligence. Set 3, the control, will increase vocabulary, but not emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

Emotions are difficult to define; many researchers have debated over the best ways to describe and sort emotions. Despite the difficulty, the ability to differentiate emotions with greater granularity has positive implications, including better emotion regulation and healthier coping mechanisms, both indicators of high emotional intelligence. The proposed study seeks to determine whether the expansion of emotional concepts increases emotional intelligence. The results will have applications in a range of fields including management and psychology, potentially illuminating a new way of training individuals in emotional intelligence.

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Budget

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Materials

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Payment

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Participants' payment - \$1200